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Defining the American System

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Defining the American System

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Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

Abstract

American systems are commonly discussed in system justification literature; however, little is known about what subsystems are important to Americans' understanding of the overall American system and what impact status has on forming these perceptions. This study attempts to answer these questions by asking Americans about their perceptions of the overall American system and seven underlying subsystems (political, economic, employment, education, criminal justice, social services, and health care). Three hundred and forty three community members from the Chicagoland area and Mechanical Turk were recruited to participate in the survey. It was hypothesized that high-status participants would prioritize the subsystems that they justify while low-status participants would prioritize the subsystems they do not justify in their understanding of the overall American system. Status, measured by income, did not significantly predict this relationship. It was further hypothesized that justification of subsystems and income would each have a positive relationship with justification of the overall American system. Justification of subsystems was found to be a significant predictor of justification of the American system; however, status did not predict American system justification. Finally, an exploratory cluster analysis revealed three distinct clusters which indicated different ways participants conceptualized the American system. This analysis makes the first steps towards understanding how various subsystems within the American system are conceptualized and perceived by people of different statuses. Future directions for this research are discussed.

Introduction

The 2016 presidential election campaign, like most, bombarded the country with conflicting narratives of how the American and the political systems have functioned during the previous administration. With campaign slogans like "Make America Great Again," it is easy to see that there were differing opinions on whether the American system was living up to its potential. This demonstrates that people make sense out of system information differently. For instance, the passing of the Affordable Care Act was perceived on one side of the aisle as a triumph for providing better access to affordable healthcare; while the other side perceived this as a step towards destroying a competitive marketplace in the United States. In this example, these two groups have very different perceptions of how to improve the health care system in America.

Research in system perceptions has provided explanations for when and why a group of people may approve of a system and when they may not. System justification literature proposes that people are motivated to legitimize current social, cultural, economic, and political systems and perceive them as fair and just (Jost & Benaji, 1994). However, despite all of the literature on system justification in American systems, researchers have yet to define what they mean by the "American system" and the subsystems which comprise it. The current research investigates how perceptions of the American system and various subsystems may lead different groups of people to justify different systems.

To provide background for this analysis, first there will be an overview of system justification theory followed by a discussion of how status plays a role in

system justification. Next will be a brief overview of system condemnation to provide an alternative perspective on how low-status groups perceive systems. Regulatory focus theory will be outlined to help ground the conceptualization of how people of different statuses may conceptualize the American system. Finally, because systems in system justification literature have been ill-defined, the next sections focus on outlining the American system and seven underlying subsystems and explaining how status may alter perceptions of these systems.

Perceiving the American System: From Justification to Condemnation

Nearly 25 years ago, system justification theory was proposed as an explanation for why someone would conclude that a system, such as the political system, is functioning well. More specifically, system justification theory explains that system justification is a motive to defend and justify the status quo and to bolster the legitimacy of the existing social order (Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004; Jost & Benaji, 1994). Once aware of justifying tendencies, it is easy to identify system justifications all around us—like when an incumbent political candidate justifies the current American system of governance as functioning well while his or her opponent dismisses the system or sees it as functioning poorly.

System justification hinges on the concept of cognitive dissonance theory, whereby people seek consistency within their cognitions, perceptions, and actions to rationalize their actions and lived experiences (Festinger, 1957; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). Cognitive dissonance requires that a person must seek consistency and remove any inconsistency from their life; this process usually manifests in a person altering or reaffirming their attitudes to be consistent with

their own behavior or consistent with the world around them (Festinger, 1957; Mills, 1958; Hart et al., 2009). This theory would predict that an avowed democrat who is informed about a scandal within the democratic party would be motivated to remove the inconsistency the scandal causes to their overall favorable impression of the democratic party by discounting or dismissing the scandal as fabricated.

People have a desire to align their system, personal, and community needs with their lived experience to alleviate cognitive dissonance. For some people, their personal, community, and system needs all align; for others, their personal goals and needs, and those of their community, are at odds with the systems they are a part of (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003). Low-status individuals may struggle to align the disadvantages they experience within systems with their personal and community needs, which creates dissonance. By justifying the system, these people can remove the dissonance between feeling disadvantaged by the system and wanting the world around them to be predictable and functional. One way to resolve this dissonance is by internalizing the blame for their poor individual outcomes (Lane, 1959; Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003). High-status individuals do not struggle with this dissonance because their lived experiences already align with their needs. Without dissonance, people can enjoy a consistent perception of themselves and their community within the system.

Living within a familiar and predictable environment is comforting to many people as it helps to eliminate the inconsistencies that lead to cognitive

dissonance. Instability in one's environment leads to uncertainty and discomfort which causes many people to search for justifications to maintain the current, familiar system (Jost, et al., 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Those who justify the system can go to great lengths to rationalize how the system is fair and functional. For instance, system justifiers will begin to rely more heavily upon stereotypical information to justify the inequalities the system imbues on some groups (Jost & Hunyady, 2002). For example, creating a logical narrative for the inequalities seen in the world comforts those who reap the rewards by explaining that their status is deserved, while also comforting those at the bottom by explaining that their position is the way the world works and that one day they could be at the top.

As a way to affirm the functionality of the status quo, system justification literature specifies that people rely on a belief in and acceptance of a just-world. In a just-world a person's actions bring about fair and appropriate consequences to the extent that worthy people are rewarded and those unworthy are punished (Lerner, 1980; Furnham, 2003). Belief in a just-world grants people peace of mind that the world around them is orderly and functions on a set of obeyed laws, decreasing a sense of personal vulnerability and increasing trust and confidence in the future. In a world without these laws, good deeds would go unrewarded and bad things would happen for no reason. In turn, belief in a just-world will lead people to accept and perpetuate inequalities among groups (Hafer & Olson, 1993; Jost, 2001; Mullen, Brown & Smith, 1992; Furnham & Procter, 1992). Believing that the world ensures people get what they deserve means that the people struggling in society must deserve their status while those thriving must have

earned their rewards. Because of this, high-status people are more willing to turn a blind eye to inequality and rely on stereotypic information about disadvantaged groups to legitimize the group's outcomes (Anderson, Kay, & Fitzsimons, 2010; Jost & Hunyady, 2002).

To further affirm the status quo, system justifiers abide by the Protestant Work Ethic (PWE). The PWE suggests that people have a moral duty to work tirelessly to achieve success and that only through hard work and self-discipline can people better themselves (Katz & Hass, 1988; Levy, West, Ramirez, & Karafantis, 2006). PWE is intimately tied to traditional American values. The first colonies of the United States were founded upon Protestant values and these were later interwoven into what it means to be "American" (Katz & Hass, 1988; Katz, 1985). Similar to the belief in a just-world, PWE determines perceptions of fairness: people who work hard achieve success and those who are unsuccessful have not worked hard enough. System justification literature suggests that PWE can serve a palliative function when perceiving the status quo (Jost et al., 2013; Kay & Jost, 2003). Within the confines of PWE, status in society is something that is deserved and earned rather than something that is haphazardly gifted to some and not others.

The Role of Status in System Perception

Status is critical to the discussion of system perceptions. The United States is intimately connected to the idea that people can gain and lose status, or our relative social position, in society. And our status can shape how we see the world around us. Status yields such power because it helps dictate what a person

experiences and what a person can achieve in their life. Those of higher status typically have more opportunities afforded to them leading them to more successful future endeavors. Conversely, those of lower status typically have fewer opportunities for future success.

Status according to system justification perspectives. According to system justification theory, justification tendencies can be seen in people from all backgrounds. Although both high- and low-status individuals can justify systems, this justification looks different and affects individuals differently. High-status groups tend to benefit the most from maintaining the status quo and are therefore most likely to justify current systems (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Sidanius,1993). The status quo is important to high-status people because it maintains their privileged standing within the system. High-status justifiers benefit psychologically from their system justification by experiencing boosts in self-esteem (Jost & Thompson, 2000), well-being (Jost & Thompson, 2000) and ingroup favoritism (Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992; Jost & Burgress, 2000). These benefits stem from the high-status group's ability to align their personal, community, and system needs with what the current system is providing them; therefore, they suffer less from dissonance caused from competing needs and system outcomes (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003). In other words, high-status individuals believe the system is working properly because they reap the benefits from the system.

The most controversial finding in system justification research is that those disadvantaged by a system are found to sometimes endorse and support the

system which harms them (Henry & Saul, 2006; Van der Toorn, et al., 2015; Jost et al., 2003). Some research suggests that low-status individuals will justify systems just as much as, or even more so than, high-status individuals (Jost & Banaji, 1994; McCoy & Major, 2007; Jost, Banaji & Nosek, 2004). This means that low-status individuals, who are normally disadvantaged within the system, will in fact believe that the system is just and functioning well even when it disadvantages them (often via endorsement of ideologies like PWE and belief in a just world).

According to system justification perspectives, low-status justifiers can benefit from reduced feelings of frustration at their position in the system, meaning that justifying the system alleviates dissonance they may feel from their low place in the system (Jost, Wakslak & Tyler, 2008); however, this comes at a cost. This complacency is associated with reduced self-esteem and well-being (Jost & Thompson, 2000), increased outgroup favoritism (Mullen, Brown, & Smith, 1992; Jost, Pelham, & Carvallo, 2002; Jost & Burgess, 2000), increased self-stereotyping (McCoy & Major, 2007), and ambivalent ingroup attitudes (Jost & Burgess, 2000). Low-status justifiers are stuck between believing that the system they live within is right and true, while also understanding that because they are not benefiting from the system, they must not be worthy of the system's benefits.

Despite these findings, a growing body of literature suggests that system justification, especially among low status groups, does not occur to the extent the system justification literature suggests. Although disenfranchised groups may

endorse system justifying ideologies in the abstract (like PWE), they do not believe the system is living up to its ideals (Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013). Furthermore, a large-scale, random sample survey suggests that low-status individuals do not justify systems at all, contradicting many system justification findings (Brandt, 2013). It is important to reconcile contradictory findings regarding status and system justification.

Regulatory focus theory: An alternative perspective. People of different statuses may have different motives when interacting with systems. Although not originally developed in the context of systems, regulatory focus theory can be applied to this context to describe the motivations of those from different statuses when perceiving various systems. Regulatory focus theory states that people have two motivational foci in life: increasing positive states and avoiding negative states (Bowlby, 1973; Higgins, 1998; Higgins & Cornwell, 2016). The first focus, promotion focus, aims to improve the status quo through nurturance, growth, and advancement (Higgins, 1998; Higgins & Cornwell, 2016). The second focus, prevention focus, aims to prevent the status quo from worsening through security and safety (Higgins, 1998; Higgins & Cornwell, 2016). People tend to gravitate towards and rely on one of the motivational foci; however, people can be high or low in both strategies or alternate between strategies depending on the situation.

In systems research, we can think about the different ways in which people perceive the system as stemming from different goal-related behaviors. Differing experiences with a system can lead those who are advantaged or

disadvantaged by a system to perceive the system differently and therefore have different motivations around that system. Individuals who are advantaged by the system have a unique perspective of the system: for them, the system is highly functional, and they are positioned near the top. Therefore, those advantaged by the system may be motivated by goals for maintaining the status quo to keep their advantaged positioning. On the other hand, those disadvantaged by the system understand that they are near the bottom of the system and feel the disparate effects of the system. Consequently, those disadvantaged by a system are motivated by goals of promotion to improve their current status quo (Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013). This can be achieved through modifying the extant system, or their own behaviors within the system, to improve benefits, or by dismantling systems that continue to disadvantage one's group.

How status influences condemnation of systems. Research suggests that above and beyond not justifying systems, people are sometimes actively condemning systems. When individuals see a given system as illegitimate, unstable, and impermeable to advancement, they are more likely to condemn it and seek actions against the system (Martorana, Galinsky, & Rao, 2005). A legitimate system suggests that a system organizes people based on appropriate, equitable means in which those in power do not abuse their positions (MaGee & Galinsky, 2008). When legitimacy is violated, those without power will have more motivation to act against the system (Lammers, Galinsky, Gordijn, & Otten, 2008). Stability in the system begins to falter when legitimacy is lost. Finally, when entry into a high-power group is impermeable, low-power groups have no

other choice than to band together in collective action against the system in hopes of improving their position (Wright, Taylor, & Moghaddam, 1990).

Because high- and low-status people may perceive the system as failing them, people of all statuses may condemn a system. However, their power differentials lead them to condemn the system in different ways. A low-status individual may be more likely to commit small acts of resistance, but because of their restricted access to resources and power they must find social or economic means of supporting their cause (Kellogg, 2011; Martorana, Galinsky, & Rao, 2005). A high-status individual has the social and/or economic means to mount change in a system deemed unsuitable to them (Martorana, Galinsky, & Rao, 2005). We saw this in Donald Trump's 2016 Presidential campaign slogan of "Make America Great Again"—a rallying cry for those generally privileged in America who felt the country was heading in an unsavory direction. Together, this means that low-status groups actively condemn systems but have difficulty enacting changes; while high-status groups have more resources to effect change in a system they condemn. Condemnation offers an alternative perspective on how people may perceive a system. Yet, condemnation echoes system justification in that low-status groups are at a disadvantage due to their restricted resources and power, so they must adapt their perceptions and actions in a system to meet their needs and abilities.

Effectually, power differentials also drive how people of differing statuses are impacted by different systems. Life experiences with certain systems make those systems more salient to some people than for others. For instance, the

disparate effects of the criminal justice system on low-status individuals, in addition to the increased likelihood of their contact with the system, may make the criminal justice system more salient to them. Because low-status individuals may be motivated by a promotion focus, they would be motivated to improve their status from its current low levels in the criminal justice system; therefore, this system may be more salient for them than it would be for high-status people. Conversely, high-status individuals fair better in the economic system. With access to more economic resources, the economic system may become more salient to high-status people. Because of their prevention focus, high-status individuals seek ways they can prevent their advantaged position from diminishing in salient systems, like the economic system.

Altogether, this suggests that our life experiences effect how salient specific systems are to us and thus how we react to these systems. The salience of these systems is important because it can drive how people conceptualize the world around them. A salient system will spring to mind more readily than a less personally relevant system. Therefore, when thinking about what constitutes an overarching system like the "American System," the subsystems more salient to an individual will contribute more to their definition of the overarching system.

The Systems that Comprise the American System

The system justification literature focuses on a select few systems, namely the political, economic, employment, education system and "American system" broadly (see below for more information). Though the current literature examines some systems, it has overlooked other important systems that may be more salient

to low-status groups like the criminal justice, social service, and health care systems. These three systems serve important roles in the United States, from maintaining law and order to ensuring the health of the populous. A quick look into current popular discussion of these topics reveals that they are controversial, with many people arguing different sides. Most people in the United States agree that the criminal justice system requires a lot of reform (Pew Research Center, 2018; Volokh, 2015; NBC12, 2018); however, questions about how much reform or what kind of reform spurs a lot of debate (WDRB, 2018; Platt, 2018). Similarly, debate over health care reform has intensified over the past 10 years with large partisan divides over how to improve the system (Sullivan, 2018; Fingerhut, 2017). Finally, U.S. support for social services and aid for the needy has increased since the 1990s, but partisan divides remain, with democrats supporting more reform efforts (Goldstein, 2018; Morin & Neidorf, 2007). The debate surrounding these systems suggests that perceptions of these systems vary depending on who is perceiving them. This trend reflects that of the systems currently being studied in system justification research.

Of those systems analyzed in system justification literature, researchers have adopted a narrow view of the systems. For instance, fair market ideology has been used as a basis for the economic system in justification literature (Jost, Blount, Pfeffer, & Hunyady, 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2005). Problematically, participants have not been asked if they actually think about fair markets when they think about the economic system. Researchers have not been considering the possibility that participants are thinking about different things when they consider

common systems. Perhaps some participants do think about fair market ideology when asked about the economic system; but unless it is empirically tested, we cannot conclude that the majority of participants agree on this fact. Above and beyond not testing current representations of the systems used in research, current representations are far too narrow to represent the overall system. Focusing on fair market ideology is only a sliver of the overall economic system.

Further problems arise when comparing results across studies. Since there are no standard definitions for specific systems, researchers discuss systems in varying ways without concern for consistency with other literature. One study may use perceptions of personal financial wellbeing as an indicator for economic system justification (Jost, 2001), while another study may use perceptions of the United States' control over fiscal wellbeing (Hennes, Ruisch, Feygina, Monteiro, & Jost, 2016). These two ways of assessing system justification may both assess different aspects or outcomes of the economic system, but they are difficult, if not impossible, to compare. Unfortunately, the various manipulations and rough definitions of systems are commonly lumped together to represent system justification tendencies.

My research attempts to rectify these problems by analyzing a more exhaustive list of broader systems that may be differentially salient to groups of different statuses. Furthermore, I aim to specifically define these systems to provide my participants with a baseline understanding of each system and therefore establish more consistent and interpretable system perceptions. Experiences with the system should therefore not color what part of the system is

being thought of, but rather, should impact system perceptions and how people prioritize systems, namely, how much influence people believe certain systems have on their conceptualization of the overall American system.

What is a "System"?

The term 'system' became a popular way of describing biological and chemical networks in the twentieth century. Under its original use, a system was described as a set of interacting components with interrelationships and boundary conditions that serve to filter inputs and outputs in a system (Von Bertalanffy, 1956; Berrien, 1968; Miller, 1978). This biological conceptualization of a system generalizes across fields of research. Some researchers expanded the biological conceptualization of a system to a societal conceptualization by describing the part-whole relationship in communities or societies. The part-whole relationship suggests that an organism or population begins to integrate as parts to a larger inclusive whole (Redfield, 1942; Gerard, 1942). Furthermore, in this conceptualization, individual parts of the system (economics, politics, etc.) stand as independent, uniquely functioning parts of the system with strong interconnections which "can only be fully understood once we see them as integral parts to a whole" (Park, 1942). After this conceptualization, systems became readily used in economics, politics and other realms of study.

The American system is an overarching system that represents the interconnected functions of government and society in the United States. Some research utilizes this system as a societal representation (Ledgerwood, Manisodza, Jost, 2001; Jost, & Pohl, 2011; Wakslak, Jost, & Bauer, 2011), while other

research looks specifically at the “American system” as an abstract construct (Carter, Ferguson, & Hassin, 2011; Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013). As a whole, this research suggests that the American system acts as both a connecting unit and an overall measure of the pulse of the United States. It is a connecting unit in that it subsumes all underlying systems within the country. It is a measure of the “pulse of America” in that it is an overarching representation of all the subsystems in America so that if the American system is perceived to be functioning well, that evaluation can be subsequently applied to its subparts.

A system can be divided into subsystems. Subsystems are a self-contained unit superseded by the larger system which can act both independently and in tandem with the larger system (Hall & Fagen, 1968). The American system acts as a superseding system with interconnections that encapsulate the underlying subsystems. Within the American system, seven underlying subsystems were distilled from previous literature and will be used for the purpose of this analysis: political, economic, employment, education, criminal justice, social services, and health care. These systems can stand on their own, with unique functions, goals, and effects on society. Because each subsystem functions uniquely, it also impacts different groups of Americans in unique ways—from the types of interactions an individual will have with the system to the quantity and quality of those interactions. For instance, someone who receives aid from a social service is likely to interact with the social services system more often compared to a person who does not receive assistance. Furthermore, someone who works as a police officer and someone who works as defense attorney likely have unique

perspectives on the criminal justice system. Differences in experiences can impact how different people perceive each subsystem. Different status markers (income, race, gender, age, etc.) can also change how someone experiences a system and therefore, how those people perceive that system. These perceptions of systems are crucial for how we understand others and interpret the world around us. When discussing a system, it is critical for us to understand that because of our unique experiences and perspectives, we may not be talking about the same aspects or qualities of the system even though we call it by the same name. In the following sections we will examine each subsystem in depth, beginning with those systems studied most in current system justification literature and ending with systems newly introduced here.

Political System

A political system is a system of politics and government. The political system in the United States may include branches of government, political parties or offices, elections, voting laws and rights, and districting. This system is vast; as of the 2016 presidential campaign, there were over 200 million registered voters in the United States (Goldmacher, 2016). As a representative democracy, voters in the United States attempt to shift the political system in ways they believe serve their best interests through voting for specific politicians or voting on referendums, for instance. Although a cornerstone to our democracy, 61% of survey respondents stated that the political system in the U.S. needs significant changes to function in modern times (Pew Research Center, 2018a). However,

survey respondents had no consensus on what changes would improve democracy (Pew Research Center, 2018a).

Unsurprisingly, the lack of consensus on how to improve the political system's general functioning most likely stems from the growing divide amongst voters. Around the turn of the 21st century we saw a rift begin to form in generational support of political candidates. Specifically, voters 30 years and younger became increasingly drawn to democratic candidates while voters 65 and older remained relatively evenly split between democrats and republicans (Taylor, 2016). Not only do the generations differ in age but the racial makeup of these generations is quite different, with the Silent generation being almost 80% white and Millennials around 56% white (Doherty et al., 2018). Having a higher percentage of a nonwhite populous in the Millennials and younger generations adds differing viewpoints and therefore differing political opinions to their votership.

Generationally different demographics can lead to differences in political opinions due to differing experiences with the political system itself. Minorities in the United States have faced countless forms of discrimination, not least of which includes discrimination when it comes to voting in public elections. Historically, minorities were banned completely from voting, restricted to voting in certain places, threatened and intimidated in polling places, and redistricted so that their votes counted for less (Kousser, 1974; Hahn, 2003; Fauntroy, 2007). There have been movements to improve this discrimination such as the passing of the Voting Rights Act (VRA), and later provisions to the act in 2006, which prohibit

discriminatory actions aimed at diminishing any ability for minority citizens to vote for whom they choose (Persily, 2007). The Voting Rights Act has improved voting conditions for minority voters; however, minority voters still face many challenges when it comes to voting and lag behind white voters in polling percentages (Jones-Correa, 2005).

Alarming trends have shown the closing of hundreds of polling places in low-income neighborhoods (Vasilogambros, 2018). These closings lead to longer lines at polling places which can dissuade voters in those areas from voting because of the time commitment related to waiting in lines (Fortier et al., 2018). Furthermore, polling places that do exist can be isolated, making them hard to reach by walking or public transport (Shorman & Vockrodt, 2018). This also restricts low-income voter's ability to cast their ballots. These numerous geographic barriers to voting has led many public transit and rideshare companies to offer free rides to polling places in order to encourage civic engagement by those populations who find it difficult to reach polling locations (Sisson, 2018). Voting discrimination continues with certain areas banning early voting on college campuses which would make it easier for first-time, young voters to vote (Bousquet, S., 2018).

Beyond voting, the United States struggles with representation in government. Minorities have been and continue to be underrepresented in both State and Federal government positions (Starks, 2009; Krogstad, 2015; New American Leaders Project, 2016). Minority representation in government has important consequences for minority citizen's lives. For instance, higher

government representation led to a more politically engaged and participatory minority population (Banducci, Donovan, & Karp, 2004) and to more minority-friendly political legislation led by minority government leaders (Pande, 2001; Volden, Wiseman, & Wittmer, 2010). Similarly, representation of Generation X and Millennials in the House of Representative has lagged behind the composition of eligible voters in the United States, only seeing a slight increase as of the 2018 midterm elections (Desilver, 2018). Furthermore, women only hold around 20 percent of seats in the House of Representatives and in the Senate, which has not increased in the last decade even though women represent 50 percent of the United States' population (Brechenmacher, 2018). These findings suggest that without appropriate representation, minority, youth, and female citizens will struggle to have their opinions voiced during legislation discussions and may struggle to stay engaged and motivated in politics as a result.

Current system justification literature has analyzed the political system in several ways. Most political system justification studies did not examine the influence of individual status on perceptions of the political system (Liviatan & Jost, 2014; Van der Toorn et al., 2015; Zhu, Kay, & Eibach, 2013). While other research did clearly examine the influence of economic status on political system justification (Jost et al., 2017). These studies all examine different aspects of the political system, from general perceptions of government functioning (Van der Toorn, et al., 2015) to perceptions of fairness in government spending (Zhu, Kay, & Eibach, 2013).

Unfortunately, there is tendency in system justification research to conflate the political system with other systems. For instance, a study that sought to influence political system justification through complementary stereotypes (Jost et al., 2012). Due to low sample size, however, these researchers sought to confirm this prospective relationship by examining school teachers and their justification of the education system (Jost et al., 2012). Continuing their examination of this system justification relationship within a different system context suggests that current systems literature is not interested in distinguishing the possible differences between these subsystems. So although the current literature has examined the political system in various ways, they do not consistently define what the system is and, at times, the political system is conflated with other systems such as the education system. This confusion within the literature makes it difficult to determine if their results are stemming from justification of the political system or a combination of other system influences.

When examining the current political system, we see striking differences in how people experiences the system. Minority citizens struggle to be heard in political debates, whether through difficulties in voting or through underrepresentation in government jobs. Similarly, low-income neighborhoods struggle to make their voices heard as their polling places become increasing scarce. This lack of a voice within the political sphere can cause minorities and low-income citizens to lose faith in the political system and aim to improve the system. This discrimination is contrasted by the relative ease white or high-status citizens experience when navigating the political system. These differing

experiences lead to different policy opinions, voting patterns, and could lead to different levels of system justification. Yet, the current system justification literature has struggled to isolate the political system from other associated systems, resulting in findings that are difficult to interpret. We aim to rectify this in the present study by carefully defining the political system and isolating it from other systems. By doing this, we hope to discover system justification's unique effects within the political system.

Economic System

The economic system is a system of production, resource allocation, and distribution of goods and services. This system can include national spending, banking, wall street, interest rates, and capitalism. The United States is a capitalist mixed economy which, at a basic level, means it allows its citizens to trade in pursuit of their own interests on open markets with some regulatory oversight (Hindriks & Myles, 2006). This allows citizens to become active participants within the economic sphere.

Although theoretically all citizens should have open access to economic trade and resources, in practice, this is not the case. A 2016 report from the Bureau of Census illustrates that the distribution of income disproportionately benefits those in higher statuses (e.g. Whites) and disadvantages those of lower statuses (e.g. Blacks and Hispanics). This wealth gap has been growing in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession with white households having 13 times the median income of black households and 10 times that of Hispanic households (Kochhar & Fry, 2014). Even when looking solely at lower- and middle-income

households, Whites still make three to four times as much as Hispanic and black families, respectively (Kochhar & Cilluffo, 2017).

Economic mobility has changed drastically across the generations. A new report estimates that absolute income mobility, or the proportion of children who out-earn their parents, has fallen from 90% for children born in 1940 to 50% for children born in 1980 (Chetty et al., 2017). This decrease in absolute mobility for younger generations may stem from several factors. One factor is that a college education has become increasingly more important in the workforce (see the education system section for more details); however, college tuition has become less affordable. A recent Federal Reserve study reports that between 1985 and 2011 average college tuition increased by 498% which outpaces general inflation by more than four times (Lucca, Nadauld, & Shen, 2015). In addition to higher debt due to education, Millennials are also facing increased costs in other important parts of their life like child care, health care, and housing, with first-time home buyers now paying around 39% more than baby boomers did in the 80s (Thompson, 2014; Insler, 2018). Altogether, this suggests that even though Millennials may be making more money than past generations (United States Census Bureau, 2018), their expenses are outpacing their gains. This generational difference in experiences with the economy may affect their perceptions of the economic system.

Although debt is experienced at all income levels, low-income households appear to suffer the most from their debts. In 2016, low-income households in the bottom 20% of the income brackets suffered from a debt-to-income ratio (DTI) of

2.4 while those households in any other income bracket maintained a DTI of 1.5 or less (Urban, 2018). This means that the lowest income households have more debt per dollar of income than any other household in America. These debt burdens are felt even more by low-income households because of their relative lack of financial assets. Only 15% of low-income households report having a retirement account, compared to the 56% of overall households reporting a retirement account (West Coast Poverty Center, 2014). Furthermore, low-income households are less likely to own other assets such as cars or homes (West Coast Poverty Center, 2014), which has been shown to exacerbate the cycle of poverty since these households have fewer resources to cushion financial losses (Duque, Pilkauskas, & Garfinkel, 2018).

These economic disparities are met with relatively low public concern, with 47% of Americans in a polled sample saying the income gap is a big problem, even though the United States has one of the worst income gaps of any 'advanced' nation (Stokes, 2013). Perceptions of the growing income gap seem to be influenced by the level of exposure a person has to various economic health indicators, such as the stock market or general economic growth factors (Franko, 2017). This indicates that if people are not well informed about these indicators, they may be unaware or unphased by the growing income gap. Consequently, this income gap can have negative ramifications on the nation's economic productivity and growth (Stiglitz, 2012).

The concept of system justification itself is conceptualized as a desire to support the current socioeconomic practices of any specified system (Jost &

Banaji, 1994; Jost & Hunyady, 2002). Therefore, in theory, the justification of any system is also the partial justification of the way the economic system supports said system. Focusing on the economic system independently, we see that current literature has examined it in several different ways. Some studies have examined how racial and economic differences impact justification of the economic system (Jost, Pelham, Sheldon, & Sullivan, 2003; Henry & Saul, 2006; Van der Toorn et al., 2015; Jost, 2001). While other studies did not examine any status differences in the justification of the economic system (Jost et al., 2012; Hennes, Ruisch, Feygina, Monteiro, & Jost, 2016; Blanchar & Eidelman, 2013). And yet, other research has utilized the economic system as a secondary proxy for how someone may justify a system—through economic system justification (Jost & Thompson, 2000; Caricati, 2008; Feygina, Jost, & Goldsmith, 2010; Jost et al., 2012). Over the years, researchers have focused a great deal on the examination of the economic system.

Similar to the political system, however, system justification research on the economic system has not always clearly defined its terms. One study examined the workplace and economic systems by manipulating the equity versus equality of pay within workplace scenarios and asked participants about the fairness of these scenarios (Van der Toorn, Berkics, & Jost, 2010). These researchers compared the workplace scenarios across US and Hungarian samples to understand how workplace equity versus equality in pay was viewed across cultures (Van der Toorn, Berkics, & Jost, 2010). By combining economic factors, the workplace system, and culture differences, it makes it difficult to tease apart

what is actually driving the results in this study. But, as in the case of the political system, it is likely that current researchers are not interested in how various systems may influence justification differently.

Higher- and lower-status Americans tend to have very different experiences with the economic system. Minorities continually struggle to gain economical footing within the American economic system. These struggles can make the economic system seem impenetrable to anyone besides wealthy, white Americans, causing minorities to see the system as bleak. Furthermore, low-income households struggle to better their economic means. Experiencing a system which perpetually disadvantages you can make it difficult for these low—income citizens to see the economic system as functioning appropriately. While current systems literature does explore status differences in the justification of the economic system, this research is inconsistently conducted. We aim to clarify the economic system justification by isolating the unique impact that status may have on justification of the economic system.

Employment System

The employment system includes employment opportunities, hiring practices, systems of compensation (e.g. salaries), and opportunities for workplace advancement. In 2017, over 150 million people were employed part or full time in the United States (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017a). Although this substantial portion of the American populous is employed in some way, they do not experience the same opportunities in the employment system.

Around 43 million people in America live below the official poverty level ($11,770 for an individual, $15,930 for a two-person household, etc., as of 2015), or around 13.5% of the country's population (Proctor, Semega, & Kollar, 2016). Of these, 8.6 million people are labeled as "working poor" or people who have worked for at least 27 weeks in a given year but still fall below poverty levels (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017b). Working poor are more likely to be women, part-time workers, and more than twice as likely to be Black or Hispanic than White or Asian (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017b). To break this number down further, around 1.8 million workers in the United States work at or below the federal minimum wage (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Of these 1.8 million workers, most are young (under 25), women, and less educated (a high school diploma or less) (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Theoretically, a minimum-wage job today (40-hours a week at $7.25 per hour) can lift a single person out of poverty but cannot lift any family household out of poverty compared to in 1968 when minimum wage could sustain a family of three (Desilver, 2014a).

Even if dedicated to improving their station in life, it can be difficult or impossible for most to break into the middle class. Jobs that require higher education or training are increasing at a greater rate than those jobs which require little preparation (Pew Research Center, 2016). It is beneficial to obtain higher skilled jobs because these jobs tend to pay more and their wages are increasing faster than unskilled employment (Pew Research Center, 2016). The key to breaking into the middle class, or at the least breaking out of poverty, lies in obtaining jobs that pay more but require more training or education. The catch is

that Blacks, Hispanics, and low-income individuals are less likely than Whites and other high-status people to enroll in higher education and to obtain a 4-year degree (see the education system section for more details).

Even in the workforce, discrepancies in the treatment of employees is prevalent. Women have made considerable strides in employment, improving their representation in the labor market as a whole and breaking into traditionally male-dominated fields such as engineering and technical fields (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017d). But still, women are consistently paid less than their male counterparts even when matching for education and experience (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017d). Furthermore, women bear a heavier burden when balancing work and family obligations, with more women reporting that advancement in work is harder due to parenthood and more women leaving the workplace to care for family compared to men (Taylor et al., 2013). Pay disparities continue with Black and Hispanic men earning nearly $300 less per week on average while working full time in comparable professional positions to white workers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017c). Finally, both Black and women employees in STEM fields report more incidences of racial and gender discrimination, respectively, than white male employees (Anderson, 2018; Funk & Parker, 2018).

Current system justification literature has begun to examine the workplace. A large portion of research on the employment system has examined the effects of status (in the form of race, income, and gender) on justification and system outcomes (Van de Toorn et al., 2015; Jost et al., 2003; Balsi & Jost, 2006; Blanton, George, & Crocker, 2001; Kay et al., 2009). While only a minority of

research on the employment system has not considered status differences (Van der Toorn, Berkics, & Jost, 2010; Laurin, Kay, Proudfoot, & Fitzsimons, 2013).

Again, we see inconsistencies in this research with the employment system not being clearly defined. Researchers used scenario manipulations where gender equality or inequality in the workplace was shown through men and women having the same or unequal financial success, having the same or different salaries, and being able to pay off loans more or equally as efficiently (Laurin, Kay, & Shepherd, 2011). Although the employment system and the economic system are closely related, when being viewed simultaneously in a manipulation it is difficult to disentangle their unique effects. My study aims to treat the employment system as a separate system to examine its unique effects on justification tendencies.

Throughout the employment system, from obtaining a job to work experiences within the job, we see that women and racial/ethnic minorities experience the employment system differently than their white male counterparts. These groups also experience discrimination within the workplace at higher rates. Altogether, these differing experiences within the employment system could lead women and racial/ethnic minorities, who tend to be of lower socioeconomic status to begin with, to perceive the employment system in different ways than white men, of higher socioeconomic status. While current system justification literature has examined the role of status in justification of the employment system, this study aims to extend these findings while also separating the employment system from the often intertwined economic system.

Education System

The educational system, for the purposes of this analysis, refers to publicly funded schools. This system can include school funding, curriculum, school performance, standardized testing, and teacher pay/pension.

Educational achievement has noticeably differed across race/ethnicity and income levels. Although educational achievement is on the rise, we see the continuing trend of Hispanics and Blacks trailing behind Whites in both high school graduation and college enrollment rates (Fry, 2014; Krogstad & Fry, 2014; Fry 2002). Those Hispanics who enter higher education disproportionately seek out two-year degrees instead of bachelor's degrees (Krogstad, 2016). Furthermore, even though enrollment in bachelor's institutions is increasing, both Hispanics and Blacks are underrepresented in those completing bachelor's degrees (Krogstad & Fry, 2014). Differences in high school degree attainment may stem from cultural differences not addressed within classroom settings, such as language barriers or testing strategies, and a systematic favoring of majority students (Pew Hispanic Center, 2004; Rubovits & Maehr, 1973; Irvine, 1985). While differences in college attainment stem from economic factors such as a need to help support ones' family (Krogstad, 2016).

In the years since the 2008 economic recession, more than half of states have decreased funding for their public schools and low-income students are affected the most from these funding decreases (Lynch, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). High-poverty schools are receiving the least amount of funding through both state and local channels and therefore have less funding for school

resources leaving low-income students at a disadvantage compared to high-income peers (Camera, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2011). By some reports, the school districts with the highest poverty receive $1,000 less per student compared to those school districts with the lowest rates of poverty (Camera, 2018). This funding impacts the quality of teachers a school district can attract, class sizes, the ability to offer advanced courses, early education programs, new textbooks and technologies, and school counselors (Semuels, 2016; Camera, 2018). Low funding throughout grade school and high school can have profound impacts on future educational attainment by low-income students' college enrollment trailing behind high-income student's enrollment by 30%, regardless of ethnicity (Desilver, 2014b).

Current systems literature has only begun to examine the education system. A few studies examined the education system as a stand-alone system but they did not examine status differences in its justification (Gürşimşek & Göregenli, 2006; Jost et al., 2012). Almost exclusively, education has been used as a status variable in the analysis of other systems even though education system is a ubiquitous system in the U.S., experienced by every person in the country to some extent. The current study aims to rectify the lack of focus on the education system within current literature by examining the education system as a stand-alone system. In doing this, we can explore whether or not people of different statuses choose to justify it.

We see that minority and low-income students begin to experience differences in the education system in grade school, with lower school funding

and struggles by their teachers to accommodate cultural differences in the classroom. These differences continue throughout high school and college, greatly impacting how many minority and low-income students obtain high school and college diplomas. Struggling through an education system that does not benefit you and leaves you less prepared for higher education can cause minority and low-income students to see the education system as not working well or as completely broken. This experience within the education system varies drastically from the experience of white or high-income students. Those who do not struggle through the system will not see the potential flaws in the system because they do not and will not personally experience those flaws. System justification literature has yet to truly examine the education system as its own independent system, let alone explore how status may impact perceptions of the system. This analysis intends to rectify this gap in the literature by examining the education system as a subsystem to the American system.

Criminal Justice System

The criminal justice system is the system of practices and institutions directed at mitigating crime and maintaining laws and social order. This system could include police, court systems, jail or prison systems. The United States has the highest prison population in the world with 655 inmates per 100,000 people, as reported by the World Prison Brief, a database run by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research (World Prison Brief, 2016). This incarceration rate far surpasses that of any other developed country's rates, with England coming in at a rate of 142 and Canada at 114 inmates per 100,000 people (World Prison Brief, 2016).

Having such a substantial prison population is bound to be influenced by and influences how the criminal justice system functions in the United States.

Around 93% of those incarcerated in the United States are men (Carson, 2018). Incarcerated populations are overrepresented by Blacks and Hispanics and underrepresented by Whites, with Black men being up to 6 times more likely (Gao, 2014) and Hispanic men being twice as likely (Mauer & King, 2007) as white men to be incarcerated some time in his life. These higher rates of incarceration stem from systematic racism imbedded within the criminal justice system. Police engage in more racial profiling of Black suspects and are more likely to use force in apprehending Black suspects compared to White suspects (Harris, 1999; Weatherspoon, 2004). Furthermore, research has shown that children of incarcerated parents are more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system as adults (Huebner & Gustafson, 2007). Not only are specific minorities more likely to be incarcerated as adults but exposure to a parent in trouble with the law also increases their likelihood of future law troubles, creating a cyclical force leading to incarceration.

Beyond racial differences in incarceration rates, economic difference also play an important role in differing experiences with the criminal justice system. Continuously, poverty has been linked to criminal behaviors including violence and theft. Specifically, living in low socioeconomic neighborhoods and households increases the risks of committing violent acts and property crimes (McAra & McVie, 2016; Allen & Cancino, 2012; Chamberlain & Hipp, 2015; Ng, 2010). Furthermore, relative deprivation, or the stark contrast of the

inequality from a disadvantaged neighborhood next to an advantaged neighborhood, has been shown to increase property crimes in the area (Chamberlain & Hipp, 2015; Ng, 2010). Lack of access to stable economic resources leads people to seek ways in which to obtain economic stability and in some cases leads people to commit crimes.

The criminal justice system is experienced in strikingly different ways depending on a person's racial or socioeconomic status. Minorities and those of low socioeconomic status disproportionally face negative experiences with the criminal justice system. Being the subject of more negative interactions with the criminal justice system leads these groups to view the system in a harsher light compared to those who hardly interact with the system or who have positive experiences with it. For instance, a white person who has only interacted with police in traffic situations or in helpful ways (e.g., responding to a noise complaint) will likely view the police in a neutral or positive light and deem the criminal justice system as generally functioning well. Together, this emphasizes that lived experience with the criminal justice system varies along status lines. The current study aims to fill the gap within system justification literature by finally examining system perceptions of the criminal justice system across status lines.

Social Services System

The social services system refers to government aid in the form of monetary, housing, and/or nutrition assistance given to people with disabilities, people with low income, the elderly, or dependent children. This system can

include programs such as Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (welfare), food stamps, housing vouchers, social security, and the Veteran's Association. The federal government spends the vast majority of federal tax revenue (73%) on social services, including programs like social security, Medicare, and veterans' benefits (Desilver, 2017). This amount of government spending suggests that social services affect most Americans in some way or another. The Pew Research Center finds that 55% of American adults have received some sort of benefit from social services (Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, welfare, unemployment benefits, or food stamps) at some point in their life (Morin, Taylor, & Patten, 2012; Board of Trustees, 2015).

The demographic breakdown of those receiving benefits differs by which benefits they receive. Those who receive Social Security and Medicare tend to be 65 years or older and making less than $30,000 a year, with no differences across race (Morin, Taylor, & Patten, 2012). Across the generations, it appears most Americans believe that Social Security and Medicare have been good for the country; however, generations differ in how well they believe these services do in serving the people they cover (Kohut, Taylor, & Keeter, 2011). Conversely, women across races, but women of color in particular, are more likely to receive food stamp benefits in their lifetime (Morin, 2013). Furthermore, more than 55% of adult TANF recipients are under the age of 30 (Office of Family Assistance, 2016). Perceptions of government's role in helping those in need differ by whether the respondent has ever received benefits from social services; three-quarters of those who have received benefits agree that the government should

help the needy, as opposed to six-in-ten of those who have not received benefits (Morin, Taylor, & Patten, 2012).

System justification research has yet to explore the social service system; however, the currently explored survey research has suggested differences in social service experiences across status lines. The diversity of social services makes it an extremely complicated system which impacts a diverse range of people from different walks of life—from veterans, the elderly, to someone who lost their job. Due to this complexity, perceptions of social services can differ drastically depending on experiences with the different benefits or perceptions on who is benefitting from them. The current study will examine the impacts of status on system perceptions of the social service system.

Health Care System

The health care system is the organization of people, institutions, and resources that deliver health care services to the general population. This system can include national health care policies (policies on dependent coverage, premiums, preexisting conditions), Medicare/Medicaid, and health insurance. Through the vastness of the health care system and the recent turmoil surrounding health care policy changes in government, the health care system is experienced by Americans in different ways.

Across all aspects of health, disadvantaged groups have worse health than advantaged groups (Matthews & Gallo, 2011). Health outcomes are even worse when we look specifically at racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. Even at higher socioeconomic statuses, Blacks and Hispanics suffer from poorer

health and increased risk of disease compared to Whites of similar socioeconomic status (Smedley, Stitch, & Nelson, 2003; Karter et al., 1998). Explanations for these prevalent and stable health disparities range from lower levels of economic success, higher level of exposure to toxins, reduced access to health care, lower quality of health care, and social psychological disparities between groups (Penner et al., 2010; Major, Mendes, & Dovidio, 2013).

The majority of Americans are not satisfied with the state of health care in the United States with 20% of people saying they are satisfied with the health care system and 71% saying the healthcare system is in a state of crisis (Reinhart, 2018). Beyond the general discontentment surrounding health care, further inequities emerge. For instance, Hispanics are twice as likely as Blacks and three times as likely as whites to be uninsured (Livingston, Minushkin, & Cohn, 2008). Unfortunately, even Hispanics with health care report problems communicating with their health care providers due to language and cultural barriers (Pew Hispanic Center, 2004). When looking at how these differences in access to health care and experience in the health care system impact perceptions of policy, we see that Black and Hispanic voters overwhelmingly support the Affordable Health Care Act, 85% and 84% respectively, stating that government should be responsible for providing coverage; while more than half of white voters disapproved of government mandated coverage (Bialik, 2017; Kohut, Doherty, Dimock, & Keeter, 2012).

Low-income patients face many obstacles to obtaining the health care they need, including the affordability of their care and ability to take time away from

work to obtain care (Lewis, Abrams, & Seervai, 2017). Firstly, health care can be prohibitively expensive whether you have insurance or not. Low-income patients may forgo paying for both health insurance and visiting the doctor because both can make them choose between their health and their family's financial wellbeing (DeVoe et al., 2007; Lewis, Abrams, & Seervai, 2017). Time is another important factor to consider when looking at access to health care. Obtaining care can be time consuming and excessive wait times at care facilities can be prohibitive to low-income patients who struggle to take time off of work (Carrillo et al., 2011). Furthermore, those low-income individuals and families using Medicaid are affected by more barriers to obtaining timely health care than those with private insurance (Cheung, Wiler, Lowe, & Ginde, 2012). So not only do low-income patients struggle to afford their health care in the first place but obtaining the care can further harm their economic wellbeing through missing work while waiting for their care.

The Affordable Care Act was created to attempt to rectify disparities in the access to health care and make it more affordable for low-income individuals and families. Some research suggests that the ACA did in fact reduce socioeconomic disparities with the absolute gap in insurance coverage falling from 31% to 17% after the ACA expansion (Griffith, Evans, & Bor, 2017). Even though it may have reduced the absolute gap in insurance coverage, low-income people and families still struggle to afford their premiums and deductibles on the ACA marketplace (Newkirk, 2018). So, although more Americans are protected from catastrophic

illnesses sending them into bankruptcy, routine care continues to financially burden low-income people (Newkirk, 2018).

Differences in experiences with the health care system are twofold; first, there are differences in who may find it more necessary to seek aid from the health care system and, secondly, how the system works for people once they seek aid. People from disadvantaged groups may be more dependent upon the health care system as their health is poorer than those from advantaged groups. However, these disadvantaged groups struggle to find quality (or any) health insurance they can afford. Having to choose between their physical or financial wellbeing can cause these disadvantaged people to view the health care system in negative ways. Conversely, those of high-status who have always been able to afford coverage through work or through private means have not faced this struggle of choosing between their health or their financial security; therefore, they view the system more positively. Together, this suggests that people from different socioeconomic statuses view the health care system differently due to their experiences with the system. System justification literature has yet to explore the health care system; therefore, this analysis will take the first look at how people perceive the health care system across different status lines.

Rationale and Hypotheses

The current analysis builds upon previous system justification literature that defines system justification as a belief that a system operates as it should and that the system treats people fairly. Previous literature has not examined or defined what the American system is or what it means to people. Uniquely, the

current analysis seeks to understand this. To do this, the overall American system is broken down into seven subsystems. Previous systems literature has focused on a select few subsystems and has typically left the subsystems ill-defined; by expanding these subsystems to seven underlying subsystems, we can differentiate how perceptions of the American system are impacted by how much importance people of different statuses place on various subsystems. This new systematic comparison of defined subsystems will allow us to be more confident in our comparisons across subsystems. It is only through careful, systematic analysis of subsystems that the literature will be able to make accurate conclusions about system perceptions.

I will assert that a key aspect of system perceptions and conceptualizations lies in who is being advantaged and disadvantaged by the system along status lines. It is equally important to consider how a system affects an individual and how closely this is tied to the individual's lived experience (and thus, how salient these experiences make the system). For instance, a high-status individual tends to be advantaged by the economic system and this advantaged position is a normal lived experience for the high-status person. Because of this, the high-status person will consider the economic system important to their conceptualization of the American system because it is salient to them in their daily lives. Conversely, low-status individuals tend to have a higher frequency of contact with, and are disproportionally disadvantaged by, the criminal justice system. Thus, low-status persons may consider the criminal justice system important to their conceptualization of the American system because of their concern over their

low-status within it which makes the criminal justice system more salient to them than it would be to groups that have little experience with this system.

Status is an amorphous concept which can vary depending on the context. We originally intended to examine both race and income as status variables, but our low sample size made examining racial differences prohibitive. Since income is commonly used as a measure of status within systems literature, this analysis will focus on income as our measure of high- versus low-status (Jost, 2001; Jost et al., 2003; Jost & Burgess, 2000; Kay et al., 2009; Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013).

Statement of Hypotheses

Hypotheses regarding system prioritization are discussed first (hypotheses I-Ic). These hypotheses were analyzed using multilevel modeling. This is followed by the explication of hypotheses regarding contributions to the American system (hypotheses II-IIb). These hypotheses were analyzed using multiple and simple regression analyses.

Hypothesis I: People of different income levels conceptualize the American system differently based on the different systems they justify or do not justify.

Hypothesis Ia: People at different income levels justify subsystems differently.

Hypothesis Ib: People at different income levels prioritize subsystems differently.

Hypothesis Ic: In their conceptualization of the American system, high-status participants will prioritize the subsystems they justify, or rate these

subsystems as more important, while low-status participants will prioritize the subsystems they do not justify.

Hypothesis II: As system justification for subsystems increases, justification for the American system will also increase.

Hypothesis IIa: Income level will predict overall American system justification.

Hypothesis IIb: The relationship between income and overall American system justification will be mediated by justification of subsystems.

Research Question: Are there distinct groupings of subsystems which people prioritize when thinking about the overall American system? If so, what are the prioritization profiles of these groupings?

Method

Research Participants

Participants included 343 community members. Of these, 149 were recruited from public places in the greater Chicagoland area and 194 were recruited on Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk) from around the United States. Community participants received $5 for their participation and MTurk participants received $1 for their participation. Participants were 51% female and were 70% Caucasian, 9% Black, 7% Latino, 7% reported multiple races/ethnicities, and 7% miscellaneous other races. Participants ranged from 18-80 years of age, with an average age of 36. Participants' income ranged from under $19,999 to $250,000 or more, with 56% of the sample making less than $60,000 a year, 41% making over $60,000, and 3% non-response.

Recruitment

Community members from Chicago were recruited at public spaces such as coffee shops, laundromats, parks, and free public festivals. All online participants were recruited through MTurk.

Procedure

Community. Community participants were approached by a researcher or research assistant and asked if they would like to participate in a study about people's opinions and perceptions of the American system. The researchers confirmed the participants were at least 18 years old and currently living in the United States before giving them a consent form. After securing informed consent, participants were given the survey and asked to keep their answers confidential. After completing the survey, researchers provided participants with a debriefing form, asked if they have any further questions, and gave participants their $5 cash compensation.

MTurk. Qualified MTurk participants, those living in the United States and at least 18 years or older, could view the online HIT (Human Intelligence Task) providing a brief description of what participation in the survey would entail. If interested, participants clicked on the HIT and read the consent form. After accepting the terms of the consent form, the MTurkers completed the survey online. Upon completion, MTurkers viewed the debriefing page and were provided their unique completion code which they then used to redeem their $1 payment through MTurk.

Materials

The survey began with a demographics section. The survey was then divided into questions about the American system in general and then sections about each underlying subsystem within the American system. The system perception sections always began with the American system. After the American system, participants were asked how much each of the seven subsystems contributed to their understanding of the American system. After questions regarding the American system, participants proceeded to questions about each of the seven subsystems. The seven subsystems were presented in random order for the online version and in seven different orientations, one with each of the seven subsystems coming first, for the paper version. Within each system's section, questions were grouped into two sections: who benefits from the system and their system judgements. The online version of the survey randomized the order of the "benefits" and "system judgements" sections within each subsystem section; while the paper version did not randomize this order. The proposed study was drawn from this larger survey on the American system. Only hypothesis-relevant measures will be described in the following section (refer to the appendix for a complete list of measures).

Demographics. Participants were asked for their gender identity and were given the options of *female*, *male*, or *other* with an open-response option to fill in their gender identity. They were then asked an open-response question for their age. Next, participants selected all the racial/ethnic groups they identified as a member of, with an open-response option if they were a member of an unlisted group. Participants were also asked to "indicate the category that best describes

[their] annual family income" with seven response options ranging from 1 (*under $19,999*) to 7 (*$250,000 or more*).

The American system scale. Participants were asked to rate seven subsystems of the American system (political, criminal justice, education, social service, economic, employment, and health care systems) in terms of "how much they contribute to [their] understanding of the American system" from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*).

System justification scale. Participants completed a 2-item scale that measured system justifying judgments for each of the seven subsystem and the overall American system. System justification items were drawn from an established system justification measure (Jost & Burgess, 2000). The system justification measure was reduced to two high-performing scale items to decrease respondent fatigue while taking the survey. Participants rated the extent to which they disagreed or agreed with each item on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Items included, "The [political] system operates as it should" and "The [political] system treats people fairly".

Results

Data Preparation

Out of the original 368 participants, 25 were dropped for failing at least one of the attention check items. A data missingness analysis indicated that there was 1.22% missingness. To minimize the bias and error of future analysis, we chose to address missing data through mean imputation. List-wise and pair-wise deletion methods are prone to introducing unnecessary error into analysis

(Newman, 2014). Our construct-level missingness did not exceed 10%; therefore, multiple imputation methods would not produce statistically better conclusions than the mean imputation method (Newman, 2014).

After the mean imputation correction for data missingness, status was calculated by participant's income on a median-split. Those above the median (above $60,000) were labeled high-status and those below the median (under $60,000) were labeled low-status participants. The median split was used in order to create comparable groups, with 139 participants considered high-status and 193 participants considered low-status. The two system justification items were averaged to create a system justifying score for each subsystem and the American system (see Table 2 for average system justification for each system).

System Prioritization

Participants' perception of which subsystems contribute to the American system were measured by the American system scale. Participants' system justification was measured by the two-question system justification scale for each subsystem. Multilevel modeling analysis was conducted to determine how participants' system justification and status (measured by income) impacts which subsystems they decide are most important to their conceptualization of the American system. Multilevel modeling allows us to account for the non-independence of the variables; mainly, we can account for the fact that we are analyzing multiple system judgements across subsystems nested within the same participant in our analysis.

Intraclass correlation coefficient analyses were run to determine if the groups in the data differ enough to be considered "multilevel". Researchers generally recommend that an ICC1 value larger than 0.01 has enough variation to be accounted for by group differences (Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003; Reise & Duan, 2003; Nezlek, 2008). ICC1 for participants is 0.384, or 38.4% of variance in system justification was between-person variation. The ICC1 for subsystems is 0.051, suggesting that 5.1% of variance in system justification was between-subsystem variation. Finally, the ICC1 for the median split income is 0.008, suggesting that 0.8% of variance in system justification was between-income variation. Based on established guidelines, the ICC1 values for participants and subsystems indicate that it is appropriate to use multilevel modeling.

The following models used random intercepts. This analysis does not use random slopes and random intercepts because of the prohibitive nature of the small sample size. Future analysis should focus on increasing sample sizes to investigate the impact of random slopes on the multilevel models.

Hypothesis Ia. A multilevel analysis was conducted to determine if people of different statuses justify subsystems differently, lmer(System Justification ~ Income + (1|ID) + (1|Subsystems)). We hypothesized that people at different income levels would justify subsystems differently. The multilevel analysis indicated that income did not predict system justification, $F(1, 350) = 0.94$, $p = 0.333$. There appears to be no effect of status as defined by income.

Hypothesis Ib. A multilevel analysis was conducted to determine if people of different statuses prioritize subsystems differently, lmer(System Prioritization ~ Income + (1|ID) + (1|Subsystems)). We hypothesized that people at different income levels would prioritize subsystems differently. The multilevel model indicated that income marginally, but not significantly, predicted prioritization of subsystems, $F(1, 348) = 3.11$, $p = 0.078$. This suggests that there is no effect of status on prioritization of subsystems.

Hypothesis Ic. A multilevel analysis was conducted to determine if those of high-status prioritize subsystems they justify, while those of low-status will prioritize the subsystems they do not justify, lmer(System Prioritization ~ System Justification + Income + Subsystem + System Justiciation:Subsystem:Income + (1|ID) + (1|Subsystem)). The model indicated that status and justification of each subsystem did not predict subsystem prioritization, $F(1, 2175) = 2.86$, $p=0.09$ (see Table 3 for details of the analysis). Therefore, there appears to be no difference in the prioritization of subsystems based on how high- and low-status participants justify subsystems.

American System Justification

Regression analyses were conducted to determine the relationship between system justification of subsystems along status lines and system justification of the overall American system. Participants' system justification for each system, including the American system, was measured by the two-question system justification scale. The two questions were averaged to create a single system

justification score for each system. Status was measured by the median-split income measure.

Hypothesis II: A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine if as system justification for subsystems increases, justification for the American system will also increase. Analysis demonstrated that system justification across systems was a significant predictor of justification of the American system, explaining 64.7% of the variance (R^2=0.647, $F(7, 335) = 87.59$, $p < 0.001$). More specifically, political (β=0.373, p<0.001), criminal justice (β=0.203, p<0.001), social services (β=0.106, p<0.05), and economic (β=0.186, p<0.001) system justification significantly predicted justification of the American system. System justification of the education (β=0.056, p=0.20), employment (β=0.081, p=0.08), and health care (β=0.00, p=0.99) systems did not predict justification of the American system (see Table 4 for an overview). Justification of certain subsystems appears to drive the justification of the overall American system, confirming the hypothesis that subsystems have a role in the justification of the American system.

Hypothesis IIa: We hypothesized that income level would predict American system justification. Regression analysis revealed that income level did not predict American system justification, $F(1, 329) = 0.17$, p=0.895. Again, there is no effect of status as measured by income.

Hypothesis IIb: We predicted that the relationship between income and American system justification would be mediated by justification of subsystems. Because there is no relationship between income and American system

justification or justification of the individual systems, the data does not meet the criteria for a mediation analysis (refer to the Tables 5 and 6 for correlation details).

Subsystem Grouping

A K-means cluster analysis was conducted to understand if participants group subsystems when conceptualizing the American system. K-means clustering partitions the data into groups in which each data point 'clusters' around its nearest mean. This analysis does not control for extraneous variables; instead, it aims to calculate general groupings of the variable of interest. Follow-up studies can be used to map variables onto cluster membership. This analysis was conducted using the American system scale which measured how important each of the seven subsystems were to the participants' overall understanding of the American system. Systems with a high score on this measure indicated that the subsystem was important to the participant's understanding of the American system. Once the cluster analysis is complete, you can examine the centroids for each subsystem within the cluster to determine which subsystems are important to the participants in each cluster.

Several analyses were run to determine the appropriate number of clusters to use in the analysis. First, a scree plot was created (see Figure 1). The scree plot details the total within sum of squares for each number of cluster options to demonstrate the diminishing returns of within-group error. The scree plot shows an "elbow" at 3 clusters, indicating that 3 clusters represents the best solution before diminishing returns. Second, a composite metric was analyzed (see Figure

2). This composite provides the best average performance of the number of clusters amongst 30 metrics published on cluster analysis. This analysis suggests that the majority of the cluster analysis metrics recommend a 2-cluster solution, followed by a 3-cluster solution. Ultimately, it was decided that the 3-cluster solution would provide the most detail without diminishing returns[1].

The model was run with 50 random starting positions. The cluster analysis code chose the best starting position and solution from the 50 starting positions. The best cluster solution for the 3-cluster model is shown in Figure 3. Cluster 1 contained systems with high means for all systems. Cluster 2 contained systems with means near the midpoint for the political, criminal justice, and economic systems with low means for the education, social service, employment, and health care systems. In cluster 3, all systems had means around the midpoint of the scale, indicating moderate levels of importance (see Table 7 for more details on the distribution of means).

Discussion

Justifying systems can serve as a powerful motivator to maintain the status quo and make people feel secure in their place within the system. Being able to understand how people conceptualize specific systems and whether or not their experiences within those systems changes their justification tendencies is important to systems research. Systems research cannot claim to fully understand people's perceptions of systems before first understanding how people interact

[1] A 2-cluster solution was tested. Results indicated one cluster with high means on all subsystems and one cluster with low means on all subsystems. The 3-cluster solution was found to be more informative and is further discussed in this analysis.

with and conceptualize those systems. The current research builds upon the existing systems literature while adding much needed nuances to how the literature defines systems and how we should study the vast array of possible systems.

Utilizing multilevel modeling, this study explored the influence of status differences on how people justify and prioritize subsystems within the overarching American system. The multilevel analyses revealed that status differences, as measured by income on a median-split did not predict system justification across the subsystems for this sample. Nor did income predict prioritization of the subsystems. Finally, there was no interaction between status and prioritizations of subsystems people do or do not justify.

There are several reasons why status may not have played a large role within this analysis. One reason could be that our sample did not contain enough participants in the tail ends of the income distribution. The majority of our participants clustered around incomes between $40,000 to $79,999. This income range is right around what is considered middle class incomes in most of the United States (Fry & Kochhar, 2018). By utilizing a median-split, we effectively divided these middle-class participants into our low-income and high-income groups. Because of this, our low- and high-income groups likely recessed to the mean, obscuring possible status differences.

Another reason we did not find status differences could stem from the way participants were asked about the various subsystems. The survey focused on global impressions of these systems in the abstract (e.g., how fair the “economic

system" is), which may have caused participants to remove themselves and personal experiences from their evaluation of the systems. This global perspective differed from previous systems research which focused on specific aspects of subsystems. For instances some systems literature engaged participants in an experiment which assessed their individual economic outcomes (Jost & Burgess, 2000). In this situation, participants were focusing their responses to their own experiences within the system. Therefore, with the current study focusing on the overall functionality of the various subsystems, we may have detracted from participants' personal experiences within each system.

As the results and Table 2 illustrates, the mean levels of all system justifications fall below the midpoint of the scale (i.e., they fell in the "disagree" zone of the scale), suggesting that people are not justifying systems at all. These findings further illuminate a growing body of literature which suggests that people on average do not justify systems (Brandt, 2013; Zimmerman & Reyna, 2013). System justification literature often focuses on the relative justification of people compared to others. However, if all participants fall below the midpoint on a justification scale, we cannot really conclude that one group justifies a system more than the other when neither is actually justifying. If people are not justifying these systems, we must start to consider other perceptions. Perhaps people condemn systems as failing to work. Or perhaps people have more nuanced perceptions of systems as working for some people in society but failing for others.

Further analysis tested whether justification of the American system was simply a function of justifying subsystems. Analysis revealed that justifying subsystems was a significant predictor of justifying the overall American system. More specifically, we found that the political, criminal justice, social services, and economic systems were driving this relationship. The education, employment, and health care systems do not significantly contribute to the justification of the American system. These findings suggest that only certain subsystems drive perception of the overall American system. Similar to the multilevel analysis, income was not found to predict American system justification.

These findings add critical nuance to the existing literature by distinguishing between specific subsystems. Some previous systems literature treated system justification as a monolithic concept in which system justification of the economic system functions similarly to system justification of the American system. The current analysis reveals that we may not be able to equate justifications across systems, as justification of the American system in general was driven by only 4 out of the 7 subsystems in this sample. Therefore, justification within the other 3 systems is not related to how people perceive the American system broadly. Perhaps the justification of the education, employment, and health care systems is not as important to the overall justification of the American system. Meaning that the American system can still be perceived as working well when these three systems are perceived as not working well.

This difference may be caused also by participants distinguishing between relative control within the various systems. Systems with more government

oversight and control (e.g. political and criminal justice) may be more important to the justification of the American system; while systems where individuals/communities are perceived to have more influence on the outcomes of the system (e.g., education) does not seem to play a role in the overall American system (i.e., an individual's hard work in school, will lead to better educational outcomes but not necessarily a better country). However, these nuances between the various subsystems must be explored before we can formally conclude that system justification functions differently within and across various systems.

Finally, a cluster analysis revealed that there are distinct groupings for how participants may conceptualize the overall American system. Cluster 1 suggests that a subgrouping of participants considered all subsystems important to the American system, while cluster 3 suggests that some participants considered all of the subsystems only somewhat important to the American system. This suggests that for those in cluster 1, these seven subsystems are capturing their representation of the overall American system. However, these seven subsystems do not appear to capture the representation of the overall American system for those participants in cluster 3. Participants in cluster 3 may believe that another system (e.g., the immigration system or some form a cultural system) is more important to conceptualizing the overall American system, suggesting that there may be other subsystems we should explore to fully understand what embodies the American system beyond the systems explored within this analysis. On the other hand, it is possible that these people perceive the American system as distinct rather than a sum of functionality of subsystems.

Cluster 2 revealed a more nuanced finding which teases the subsystems apart slightly suggesting that, for this cluster of people, the political, criminal justice, and economic systems are more important to the American system than the education, social services, employment, and health care systems. This cluster further confirms that systems may have unique functions in how we conceptualize the American system. Cluster 2's nuanced results echo those found in the previous regression analysis, which also suggested that the political, criminal justice, and economic systems function differently than the other systems. Interestingly, while previous system justification literature has utilized the political system and the economic system in system justification research, it has neglected the criminal justice system. The current literature suggests that the criminal justice system drove part of the variance in justification of the overall American system, and it was found to be equally as important to the American system as the political and economic systems for people within this cluster. The importance of the criminal justice system should be explored in future system justification research as the current study demonstrates its importance in the public's perceptions.

The cluster analysis demonstrated that we have much more to learn about how people conceptualize their representation of the American system. Previous studies and the current analysis have been unable to tease apart the cognitive process people undertake to come to their final system conclusions. In other words, we do not know if people create a wholistic representation of the American system through averaging functionality or perhaps by adding up system

functionality across systems. Or perhaps people distill a global feeling of satisfaction within their place in society and utilize the systems most important to that feeling to conceptualize the American system. It is possible that different people utilize different methods to create their conceptualization with some adopting an additive model and others adopting an averaging model. Whichever the answer is, we now realize that the American system cannot be treated monolithically because people are conceptualizing it in different ways.

Overall, the current study demonstrated the importance of teasing apart the overall American system into its underlying subsystems. These subsystems have never been explored together to determine their unique or combined effects on the perceptions of the American system. The current analysis attempted to orient participants' thinking at a systemic level in which subsystems are parts to an overall whole. Leveraging the definition of a system, we asked participants to consider the broader interconnections in their lives to see this parts/whole relationship. Previous literature did not always distinguish various systems from one another, sometimes treating them as though they were in an independent vacuum of space while other times using multiple system within one manipulation. This unsystematic approach makes it difficult to compare and draw conclusions from the literature. If we are to devote our time and resources to exploring and eventually explaining a phenomenon, we need to ensure that we can draw concrete and consistent conclusion across our research.

Furthermore, previous research has studied systems in isolation from one another, making it impossible to understand their interconnections. Conceptually,

we understand that for an assembly line to work, each step along the way must add its additional part at the right time and in the right way for the final product to function appropriately. If a part is added incorrectly, the final product will also function incorrectly. Therefore, it is necessary in systems literature to examine how these individual systems function together to create a final product. From this research, we can gain insights into how one failing system may influence the perception of another system. Or how some systems may play more critical roles in the overall functioning of the final product, or the overall American system. But as previously discussed, it is unclear from the current literature how this process works in people and whether or not it may vary depending on the person.

This analysis has begun to set the foundations for why the existing assumptions surrounding subsystems may be harmful for the future of systems literature. These current assumptions prevent conclusions to be drawn across studies and it prevents us from understanding the interrelatedness between systems in the United States. By carefully and consistently operationalizing the systems we study, by considering how the systems function together as an interconnected whole, and by considering the processes by which people draw their final perceptions of systems, we can remedy these problems.

Limitations and Future Research

The current study was limited by its sample. Ideally, the sample would have included more participants to allow for more complicated multilevel analyses. Additionally, the ideal sample would have included more Black and Hispanic participants in order to use racial and ethnic values as the status variable

within the analyses. Future research should address these sampling limitations by including a larger, more representative sample of participants. Also, it would be beneficial to consider different status measures which consider both race and continuous income. A continuous income measure would allow us to understand the changes in system perceptions with the gradual change in economic status. And by using race as a measure of status we can gauge different influences on system perceptions beyond that of economic means, such as social or cultural experiences.

Due to this being the first exploration into specific subsystems, we were also limited in the scope of subsystems included in the analysis. The American system is vast and includes far more subsystems than the seven included in this analysis. Even the systems we did include within the analysis can be broken down further to analyze the differences between justification of national versus local systems. For instance, the political system could be broken down into national versus local politics or the economic system could be broken down into Wallstreet versus local bank lending. Our hope is that this analysis will provide the foundation upon which future studies can expand systems research.

Future research should focus on the processes by which people construct their perceptions of specific subsystems and overarching systems like the American system. Current analysis does not establish whether or not people have different standards at which they consider the fairness of a particular system. It is possible that people hold the criminal justice system to a higher ethical standard (as its express purpose is to serve and protect all citizens) than they hold the

economic system (as we live within a Capitalist society where people pursue their own interests). Differing standards for each system has implications for how people justify different systems and how they then conceptualize overarching systems. Furthermore, current research does not address how systems are considered when forming a conceptualization of an overarching system. People could adopt several strategies such as additive or averaging perceptions of subsystems to form a conceptualization of an overarching system. Until research addresses this concern, it will be difficult to truly understand what system perceptions of American systems mean.

Finally, it is important to consider how we introduce and define the systems we study to participants. The current study utilized definitions that were intentionally broad in scope to cover how the system function in several different ways. This method of introducing and defining systems may help to focus participants understanding of how the specific system may work within their life; however, it also makes it difficult to know whether a participant is focusing on a specific aspect listed in the definition of the system or if they are averaging the system in their mind. On the other hand, studies that focus narrowly on specific workplace or specific aspect of the economic system may not be easily generalizable. Systems researchers must address the issues involved in how systems should be defined in systems research and how those definitions will be communicated to participants. The systems we study and how we treat them within our research is instrumental to systems research. Therefore, these issues should be of foremost concern within the literature.

Conclusion

Americans are constantly assessing their world, determining whether it is working well, what can be improved, and where they fit into the overall picture. Systems research has taken on the overwhelming task of understanding how this process works. Therefore, systems literature will be strengthened from a continued refinement of its research processes. The literature will benefit from an expansion of how we measure people's conceptualization of various subsystems. It will benefit through the continued investigation of the revealed nuances of individual subsystems. And it will benefit from considering the boundary conditions to justification, allowing for a fuller understanding of the complexity with which people understand the world around them.

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Appendix A

Demographics

Gender: ☐ Female ☐ Male Other: _____

Age: _____

Which of the following racial/ethnic groups do you consider yourself a member of? (**You may check multiple groups.)**

- ☐ Black/of African descent
- ☐ East Asian/East Asian descent
- ☐ South Asian/South Asian descent
- ☐ Latino/ Hispanic descent
- ☐ Native American/ American Indian/Alaskan Native
- ☐ Middle Eastern
- ☐ White/ European descent
- ☐ Pacific Islander
- ☐ Other: _____

Please indicate the category that best describes your annual family income.

- ☐ Under $19,999
- ☐ $20,000 to $39,999
- ☐ $40,000 to $59,999
- ☐ $60,000 to $79,999
- ☐ $80,000 to $99,999
- ☐ $100,000 to $249,999
- ☐ $250,000 or more
- ☐ Don't know

What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? (**If currently enrolled, highest degree received.)**

- ☐ Less than high school
- ☐ High school graduate, diploma or the equivalent
- ☐ Trade/technical/ vocational training
- ☐ Some college credit, no degree
- ☐ Associate degree
- ☐ Bachelor degree
- ☐ Master degree
- ☐ Doctorate degree

How would you best describe your sexual orientation?

- ☐ Heterosexual or straight
- ☐ Gay or lesbian
- ☐ Bisexual
- ☐ Other, please explain: _____

How would you characterize your political views overall, or in general?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Centrist/Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Very Conservative

How would you characterize your political views on economic issues?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Centrist/Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Very Conservative

How would you characterize your political views on social issues?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Very Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Centrist/Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Very Conservative

Which of the following best describes your religious identification?

☐ Christian, specify: _____
☐ Jewish
☐ Muslim
☐ Hindu
☐ Agnostic
☐ Atheist
☐ Other: _____

What is your employment status? **(You may select more than one answer.)**

☐ Employed full time
☐ Employed part time, hours per week _____
☐ Not working: unemployed
☐ Not working: stay at home parent/ homemaker
☐ Student
☐ Retired
☐ Other: _____

If working at least part time, what do you currently do for work?

_____

What state do you live in? _____

How best would you characterize the place that you live?

☐ Metropolitan/large city (population 500,000 or higher)
☐ City/urban (population 100,000 – 499,999)
☐ Suburban (located on the outskirts of a city)
☐ Small town
☐ Rural (e.g. farm)

How long have you lived in the United States (in years)? _____

Were you born in the United States? ☐ yes ☐ no

If no, where were you born? _____

Appendix B

Free Response American System

Instructions: We would like to ask you some questions about what you think of when you think about the "American System". The American system is complex and includes a lot of different aspects and institutions, from things that affect the entire nation to things that affect local communities or individual lives. The American system means different things to different people.

Take a moment to think about what the American system means to you. Think about the things that contribute most to your understanding of the American system.

In the space provided below, please list the specific aspects or institutions within the American system that contribute most to your understanding of the American system.

_____

_____

Appendix C

American System Scale

Instructions: We have listed some possible underlying systems of the American system. Please rate the following systems in terms of how much they contribute to your understanding of the **American system**.

	Not at all			Some			Very much
Political System	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Criminal Justice System	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Education System	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Social Service System	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Economic System	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Employment System	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Health Care System	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix D

Example of System Benefits Scale

The current AMERICAN SYSTEM benefits:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Me	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Whites	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Racial/Ethnic Minorities	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Children/Teens	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Adults (18-64)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Elderly (65+)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Poor/Working Class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Middle Class	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The Wealthy	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Men	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Women	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
LGBTQ Community	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Heterosexuals	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Appendix E

Example of System Justification, Qualification, & Condemnation Scale

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Slightly Disagree	Neutral	Slightly Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
The **American system** operates as it should.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The **American system** treats people fairly.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The **American system** functions better for some groups over other groups.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The **American system** benefits certain groups over other groups	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The **American system** has failed to live up to its promises.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The **American system** sucks!	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The **American system**, please select "2" to let us know you are paying attention.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
I am very familiar with the **American system**.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Table 1

Demographics

Demographics	*n*	Percentage	*M*	*SD*
Age			36	13.93
Gender				
Female	175	51%		
Male	166	48%		
Other	2	0.6%		
Race/Ethnicity				
White	239	70%		
Black	32	9%		
Hispanic	25	7%		
Asian	17	5%		
Multiple Race/Misc	30	9%		
Income				
<$60,000	193	56%		
>$60,000	139	41%		
No response	11	3%		

Note: Total *n* = 343

Table 2

System Justification by Systems

System Justification	*M*	*SD*
American System	3.32	1.61
Political System	2.76	1.60
Criminal Justice System	3.20	1.69
Education System	3.44	1.59
Social Service System	3.51	1.53
Economic System	3.33	1.62
Employment System	3.48	1.51
Health Care System	2.84	1.57

Note: Measured on a 7-point scale (1 = *Strongly disagree*, 7 = *Strongly agree*)

Table 3

Multilevel Models Testing System Justification and Prioritization of the American System for Hypotheses Ia, Ib, and Ic

	β	Standard Error	P-value
Hypothesis Ia: System Justification ~ Income	0.13	0.13	0.33
Hypothesis Ib: Prioritization ~ Income	0.22	0.13	0.08
Hypothesis Ic: Justification:Income:Subsystem	0.01	0.00	0.09

Table 4

Regression Analysis of Subsystems Predicting Justification of the American System

Systems	*β*	*SE*	*t*
Political SJ	0.37***	0.05	7.97
Criminal Justice SJ	0.20***	0.04	4.83
Education SJ	0.06	0.04	1.29
Social Service SJ	0.11*	0.05	2.43
Economic SJ	0.19***	0.05	3.83
Employment SJ	0.08	0.05	1.74
Health Care SJ	0.00	0.04	-0.09

Note: Table represents all standardized regression coefficients. n=343 *p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001

Table 5

Correlations Between Systems

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)
(1) American System	1.00							
(2) Political System	.72	1.00						
(3) Criminal Justice System	.62	.55	1.00					
(4) Education System	.52	.50	.41	1.00				
(5) Social Service System	.52	.47	.43	.57	1.00			
(6) Economic System	.66	.63	.54	.47	.45	1.00		
(7) Employment System	.59	.54	.51	.51	.49	.65	1.00	
(8) Health Care System	.47	.51	.43	.44	.51	.44	.44	1.00

Note: n= 343

Table 6

Correlations Between Systems Including Income as Continuous Variable

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
(1) American System	1.00								
(2) Political System	.72	1.00							
(3) Criminal Justice System	.61	.54	1.00						
(4) Education System	.52	.50	.41	1.00					
(5) Social Service System	.53	.46	.43	.57	1.00				
(6) Economic System	.65	.62	.54	.47	.45	1.00			
(7) Employment System	.58	.53	.50	.51	.48	.65	1.00		
(8) Health Care System	.49	.51	.44	.44	.51	.46	.45	1.00	
(9) Income	-.03	.03	.06	.03	.01	.12	.05	.04	1.00

Note: Correlations differ slightly from Table 5 due to some participants being dropped due to non-response on the income measure, $n = 334$.

Table 7

K-Means Three Cluster Solution Centroid Means for Each Subsystem

Cluster	Political	Criminal	Education	Social	Economic	Employment	Health
1	6.53	6.26	6.22	5.83	6.39	6.03	6.10
2	5.05	4.52	2.89	2.94	4.50	2.95	2.09
3	5.04	4.59	4.90	4.23	4.91	4.67	4.48

Note: Measure assessed how important each subsystem was to the conceptualization of the American system on a 7-point scale (1 = *Not at all,* 4 = *Some,* 7 = *Very much*)

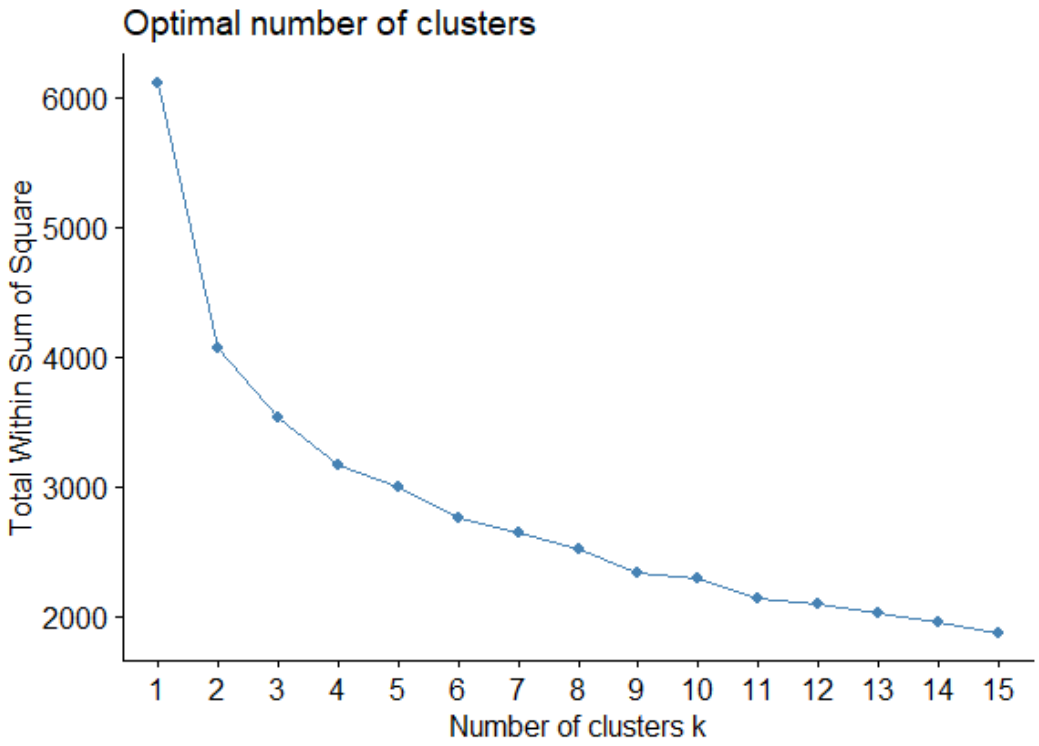

Figure 1. Scree plot from the cluster analysis.

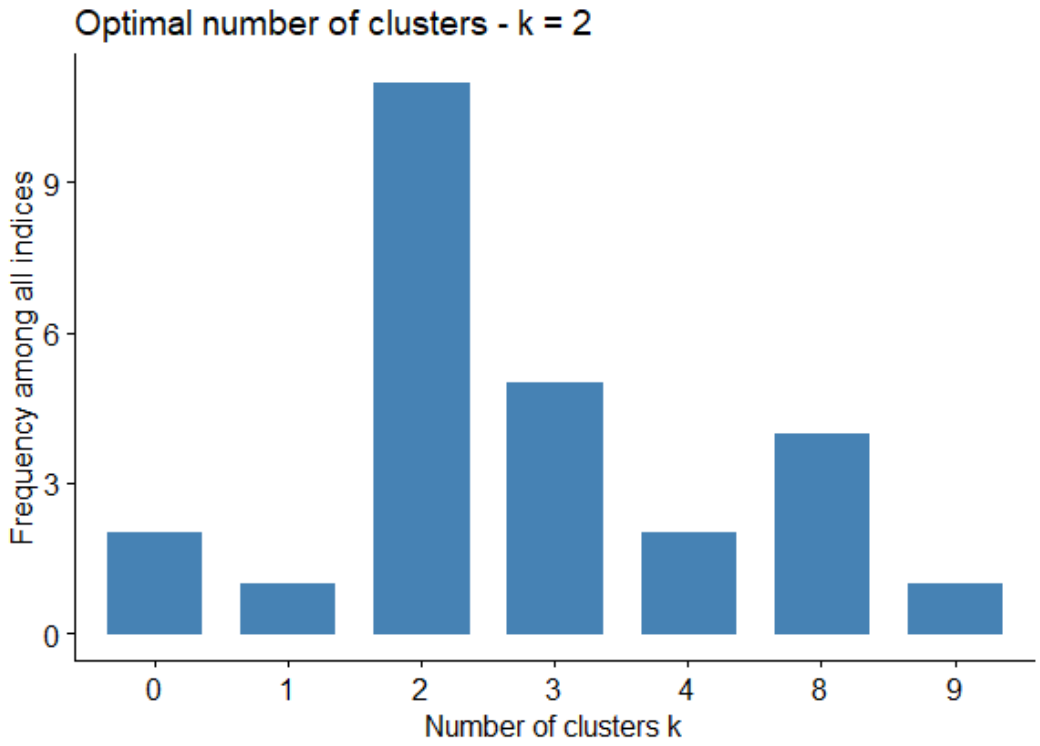

Figure 2. Cluster analysis composite metrics.

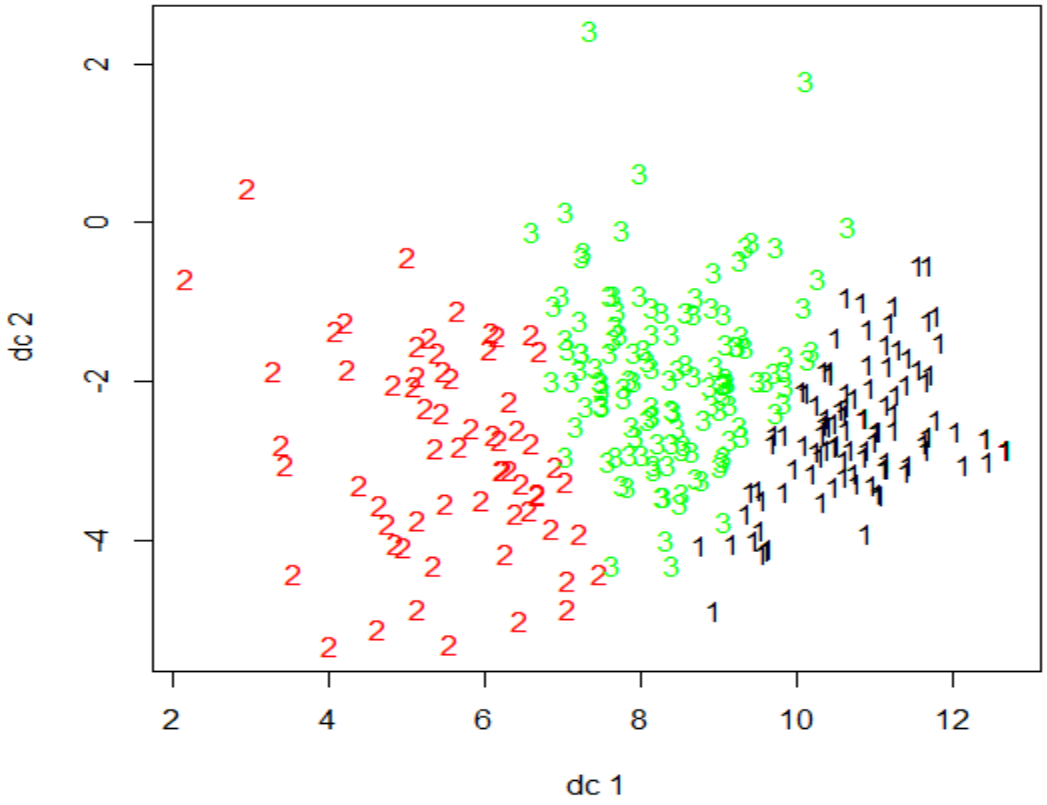

Figure 3. K-Means analysis three cluster solution.